

National Model UN•NW Conference-Opening Ceremony Keynote Speech

Delivered by David Austin, Mercy Corps on February 14, 2014

Thank you for having me. It's an honor to speak to a group of students about a few subjects that I care deeply about, to a group of the very influential stakeholders - you. I'm going to talk for about 15 minutes and then we'll have a Q & A about some of what I say, or other topics you wish to explore.

Student groups are exciting because student lead movements change the world. That's why I like the opportunity to be here. If you consider some of the more exciting movements over the last 50 years you'll notice a familiar pattern – that they were lead or fueled by student groups.

The civil rights movement of the 1960's was fueled by students.

The anti-war effort in the 1970's was student lead.

And of course the ICT industry became a revolution when it was overtaken by students. Although initially crafted by government agencies, you have to admit that it was mainstreamed once the students got involved. Think about it:

Microsoft was founded by students. Google was founded by students, Facebook,

Youtube, and of course Snapchat – all founded by students, and all are a part of our lives and global culture today.

The engagement of young people has been a pivotal force throughout the ages. Alexander the Great had conquered most of the western world by the age of 25. St. Francis and his band of impoverished brothers and sisters revolutionized the Catholic Church in the 13th century and ever since. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and the list goes on. Small groups of students who shared a vision, and committed themselves to achieving their goals are often the most effective ones at bringing about meaningful change.

As Margaret Mead so eloquently said: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

So, I want set the stage with that as my framework and context for today:

Students who are committed to a cause can and do change the world.

Thus my first point today is this: Engage. Don't expect others to change the situation – you do it. That's why most of you are here, because you want to change the world, and are preparing to do it. So don't wait for someone else to do it. You do it. Don't acquiesce to people of position or title, you assume the

responsibility and do it. You won't have the money or the resources, but if you have the vision the rest will follow.

Let me quickly tell you about a young friend of mine Michael Schoenleber.

1. Met his friend on my first trip to North Korea --2007
2. Friend introduces me to Michael via skype while Michael was a junior
3. Iraq-American Student Camp for 3 weeks in Jordan (raised the funds, got the sponsorship) -- 2008
4. Run into Michael in Senator Demint's office 4 years ago -- 2010
5. Now Michael is the Assistant to the President at USIP leading the task force for Global Mega Trends. Michael is 25.

Michael is a man of action because he is taking the responsibility on himself.

And now for my 2nd point, the means to being effective when you engage: do it with your friends. Your friends matter and they matter a lot. You'll notice that Mead's quote is about small groups who are committed. So you see, you have to be a part of a small group – which means you need to have some friends around you. I'll get back to this point in a moment, but I want you to really consider this over the next few days – your friends are very, very important. They are so

important that I would say the best thing you can get out of college is a small group of friends that you decide to stay committed to for the rest of your life.

You are familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – one of the greatest political documents ever composed. It clearly details our vision for a just world. Justice figures throughout this document.

However in his book on Ethics, Aristotle claims that friendship is even greater than justice, for “when men are friends they have no need of justice at all, but when they are just, they still need friendship.” Further as he discusses the pursuit of justice, he claims that it is the shared values and commitment in friendship that actually hold a country together.

So do not underestimate the value of a good friend.

That’s the second part of Mead’s quote, and the secret sauce to changing the world – you have to be committed with your friends. You and your group of friends have to share a vision for something that is bigger than yourselves. For Martin Luther King, Jr. and his close circle – including the fuel of his movement - Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee – they had a vision of justice that all mankind was created equal, and ought to be “judged on the content of their character and not the color of their skin.” Then they showed the kind of

character they had, and revealed the prevalence of injustice in the South, and they have since changed America.

So, start with a group of friends, maybe that's the people you came with to this event, or some new friends that you'll meet this weekend. Make sure you exert yourself on being a friend, and being open to friendship.

The reason I was appointed to the Diplomatic Service and served as at the UN Agencies in Rome was because of my friends. Let me explain:

After college I went to DC to be mentored and work with some members of Congress who were concerned about the direction of the country and decided to engage student leaders at the time to help nurture vision in young people. They wanted to impact the future direction of the country so they created an event called the National Student Leadership Forum and I was invited to help put it together. These members of Congress and many of their colleagues in Government and Business understood Lincoln's insight when he said that the "Values of the classroom in this generation will be the values of the country in the next." They also understood that vision and values are nurtured through relationship. So to make a long story short, I became close friends with a democratic Congressman from Ohio named Tony Hall who really challenged me

about the issue of hunger, and caring for the poor. Over the years He would invite my friends and me to his home, he helped us become friends with his wife and kids, and invited us to work on projects with him. Through those experiences we learned how self-centered we are and how little effort it really took to make a difference in the lives of those who are suffering from injustice.

My friends and I learned during this time that people matter. Originally we were drawn to Washington for politics, but what we learned from the good politicians is that people matter more than policy. Policies are useful, but if you don't really care about the people your policies are meant to serve, you are not going to be effective. So we had a few agreements to keep us focused: we had to be open about our lives, and we had to be willing to reconcile at the end of every day.

That is a great recipe for friendship – openness and a commitment to reconcile.

Tony's best friend in the Congress is a conservative Republican from Virginia and most of the time they voted differently on issues of policy, but what they agreed on mattered much more. They understood that they both needed to keep growing, and that they needed to stay reconciled if they were going to change themselves and change the world. Instead of staying cloistered in their caucus, they met together every week and still do.

This is my 3rd point – People and relationships really matter. They matter more than policy or your political position. If you put people first, you and your friends can really make a difference. If you put policy before the interests of people, then you will likely become divisive and alienating. You don't have to compromise your principles when you put people at the fore. So put people first.

This is how you develop courage. The Greeks valued courage almost as much as they valued justice. They realized that courage is developed in a person's character from the practice of manners, like cleaning up after themselves, or holding the door open for another. When you practice self-sacrifice in the small things, it becomes imbued into your character to become a sacrificial person, which is what we mean by courage – one who is willing to put themselves on the altar for the good of others. Friends who show manners to others put into practical practice their commitment to a cause. Is it any wonder that MLK, Jr. John Lewis, and Nelson Mandela were known as such gentlemen? It's because they knew how to lay down their lives every day for the sake of others.

In fact this idea is so powerful that it is enshrined in the Lobby of the UN Headquarters in New York in this statement: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

So, when Tony Hall was appointed by George W Bush as the US Ambassador to the UN Agencies in Rome, Tony made a deal with the White House that allowed him to take someone with him as his “Special Advisor”, and that’s what I was. I was sort of a policy advisor, speech writer, etc. but what I really was his friend. And as his friend, he gave me tremendous amounts of opportunity and authority. For one year we worked side by side on issues of hunger travelling the world to help some of the poorest and hungriest people get food and access opportunity. We were able to confront corruption and encourage those who were doing good. It was awesome.

After Rome, Ambassador Hall was asked by Secretary Rice to partner with Cardinal McCarrick to get the religious leaders of the Holy Land on board the peace process. I became their chief of staff and we spent the next 2.5 years working in Israel, the Palestinian Territories and neighboring countries getting to know the Jewish, Christian and Muslim political and religious leaders, as well as the many interests of their communities. Getting to know these men and women, establishing their trust and learning their mutual interests led us to the point where they could sit down and break bread together. The result:

By the end of our mission we had the chief rabbi of Israel, the head of the Sharia courts of Palestine and the four main patriarchs of Jerusalem at the State Dept in their first ever meeting. They said to the Secretary “None of us has the power to make peace, that’s your role. However, any one of us at this table can start a war, and we do not want to do that. We are ready to lend you the collective weight of our offices to support a political settlement.”

As these leaders became friends they were able to put their shared commitment to a unified voice for peace.

In addition to the importance of having friends, one of the many important lessons that I learned from Ambassador Hall during this time is that the big complex problems of the world are solvable. Hunger is a solvable political problem. People starve because of bad governance, and the lack of political will by others to intervene. The division on the Korean Peninsula is a solvable problem. Similarly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a political problem with a viable solution. The people involved in these conflicts know the solutions, but most of them lack the courage to implement them.

However, leaders who have committed friends that share their vision are more able and ready to make those courageous decisions. You’ll recall that in the Civil

Rights era JFK leaned heavily on his brother Robert, MLK leaned on his group of friends, and the same goes for all the other great leaders, Mandela and Walter Sisulu, Gandhi and Nehru, Rabin and Peres. None of them had it easy, and each had to suffer for years on end while they dreamed of a better future. Yet through those perilous times they had each other.

You remember in my quote from Aristotle that he said “One who has friends has no need for justice...” What he means by that is on your long march to freedom, you will encounter injustice, but if you have friends, then they can help you bear it. Friendship can withstand the sufferings of great social, economic or political injustice, but Aristotle pities even the one “who has justice, but has no friends.”

So do not wait to make your friends. Make them now and keep them close.

Grow with them. And, as you go about your work this weekend to explore solutions to the great problems of our time, remember to deepen your friendships. During your meetings, treat each other the way you want to be treated and you will find shared areas of interest with your opponents. In the hallways, on the elevators and during mealtimes be courteous and you will practice courage. Pursue Justice and you will change the world.